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Notes from Underground

Fyodor Dostoevsky

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IS : going to pay dearly for it all . . .

See Important Quotations Explained

When Liza gets up to leave, thinking she has disturbed the Underground Man, he suddenly explodes in a long, disorganized speech. He tells Liza that he never intended to save her from prostitution. Instead, he manipulated her with "pathetic words" so that he could humiliate her as Zverkov and the others had humiliated him earlier that night at dinner. The Underground Man tells Liza that he was only interested in exerting power over her, but that in a moment of weakness and fear he gave her his address. He adds that his greatest worry over the last three days has been that she might see him in his shabby dressing gown, and that she might learn that he is not the great hero she may have believed him to be. Now he will never forgive her for seeing him in this sordid environment, nor will he forgive her for listening to his hysterical speech.

At the beginning of the tirade, Liza is crushed, but by the end she understands that the Underground Man is unhappy, and she is filled with an agonizing sympathy for him. She throws her arms around him and begins to cry. The Underground Man responds by throwing himself face down on the sofa and sobbing for fifteen minutes.

Soon, the Underground Man begins to feel ashamed again, realizing that the roles have been reversed: in the brothel it was Liza who lay face down and sobbed while the Underground Man preached to her, but now Liza is the heroine and the Underground Man is the "humiliated creature." When he gets up from the sofa, he wants to dominate Liza again. She misreads his hatred and desire for revenge as genuine passion, and embraces him.

Analysis

At the beginning of Chapter IX, the Underground Man notes that he will make Liza "pay dearly" for "this." We might ask ourselves what "this" is: his shameful house, his clothes, his nervous demeanor, his ugly face, or perhaps his miserable future. Liza becomes the repository for all the aggression he has built up against those he perceives as having slighted him throughout life. In this way, the Underground Man makes a transition from victim to victimizer. When Liza responds to the Underground Man's tirade with sympathy and affection rather than horror or anger, we understand for the first time that she is a truly sensitive, perceptive, and loving person. She is intuitive enough to see that the Underground Man's cruel words stem from his insecurity, loneliness, and pride. Because she is grateful to the Underground Man for opening her eyes to the futility of her own situation as a prostitute, she naturally wants to help him as he has helped her. Even if she had not been grateful to the Underground Man, she might have responded in the same way, out of a human instinct to comfort anyone who is suffering.

This revelation of Liza's true character is somewhat ironic in the context of the novel. Throughout Part II, we have seen the Underground Man try to make the world around him fit the conventions of Romantic literature; now we see how the real world thwarts his attempts. Officers are never honorable, duels are never fought, and no one appreciates the Underground Man's sensitivity or his esteem for "the beautiful and lofty" as much as they should. We might expect the Underground Man's attempt to impose another literary convention—the redeemed prostitute—upon the banal realities of 1840s St. Petersburg to end in total failure. Based on what we have seen in the novel thus far, we expect the prostitute to laugh at the Underground Man's impassioned speeches just as the officer would have laughed at the idea of a duel. At the very

least, we expect the prostitute to turn out to be as coarse and narrow-minded as all the people the Underground Man derides. Instead, Liza is a heroine worthy of a Romantic novel—gentle, simple, and kind.

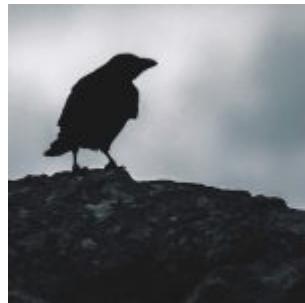
Unfortunately, because the Underground Man has never been the object of this kind of interest and sympathy, he has no idea how to handle it. When Liza first puts her arms around the Underground Man, he is so confused that he bursts into tears and allows her to comfort him. It must come as an immense relief for him to receive love and tenderness after a lifetime of indifference and abuse. In this light, the Underground Man's reaction is entirely understandable, as he is finally given an opportunity to display an emotion other than anger or resentment. However, we remember the Underground Man's comments in Part I about the intense shame he feels after displays of "sentimentality" or emotion. We also remember that the only way he can think of love is as a sadomasochistic relationship in which one person dominates and the other is dominated. Rather than concentrate on love as a mutual exchange of tenderness and sympathy, in which he and Liza might comfort each other, the Underground Man can only see that the roles in their relationship have been reversed. He has lost his power over Liza, and now she dominates him. Liza is the only person in the novel over whom the Underground Man has felt any true sense of power, and he is furious with her for taking that power away from him. His sentiment toward her quickly turns to hate, as he wants to reclaim his power over her and wants to punish her for taking this power away from him. At the end of the chapter, the Underground Man resolves to exert his power over Liza physically, by possessing her sexually and treating her as a prostitute even as she believes they are engaging in an act of love.

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Part II, Chapter VIII

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Part II, Chapter X



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